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WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH FREEMASONRY?

The First of a Series of Outspoken Articles of Critical Analysis and Constructive Suggestion on Present Day Problems of Our Ancient Fraternity

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> *Bro. Hungerford, the author of a striking and provocative book, "Seeing Both Sides of Yourself," in the present series hopes to show Masons that there are two sides to the Institution by to which they belong. We fully expect that these articles will shock, perhaps pain many good brethren, but the only way to escape judgment by the world, for men and for societies both, is to forestall it by self-criticism, and correction of that which needs amendment or modification.*

HOW does this question strike you? Does the implication that there may possibly be something the matter with Masonry instinctively arouse an attitude of resentment? Do you feel that our beloved Fraternity, like Caesar's wife, must surely be "above suspicion and beyond reproach ?" Do you cherish any sort of subconscious notion that there is something disloyal about an inquiry as to whether or not Freemasonry is meeting the challenge of our times and living up to the principles it professes?

Instead of resenting the implication of our question, you may take just the opposite attitude. Possibly, you may belong to the "anvil chorus" of your lodge and, accordingly, our question inspires you with sort of an unholy hope that somebody is about to give the Fraternity a good "ripping up the back."

Or, you may pass over our question with the indifference that seems to characterize the great majority of those who have been enrolled in our Fraternity, with the remark: "What difference does it make anyway?" Since less than 20 per cent of our members regularly attend their lodges, and a disproportionately large number show no sign that their membership in the Fraternity has made any real impression upon their lives, it must be expected that these inactive brethren are apt to be indifferent regarding any question reflecting either credit or discredit upon Freemasonry.

On the other hand, our question may not arouse you, personally, to any of the attitudes just mentioned; yet I am sure you will admit that many of your brethren will look upon our question in one of these three ways. You may be alive to the fact that we are living in a challenging age, in which every social agency or institution, no matter how ancient its origin or honorable its history, is now being subjected to a critical analysis to determine whether or not it is keeping pace with progress and doing its full share in serving the needs of our times. Surely, a society which so emphatically advocates the seeking for light, more light, and still further light, should not shun the searching rays of a critical survey turned upon its own aims, activities and achievements. Surely, as every student of its teaching knows, the

secrecy of Freemasonry was not intended, and should never be used, to hide anything discreditable to the Craft.

Yet, you will not deny that the mere suggestion of a critical study of Freemasonry will be received by many of our brethren in at least one of the three ways outlined above. This fact alone, I believe, would fully justify our series of studies, even though there were not so many additional objectives to be gained.

For example, when I mentioned the mere possibility of this undertaking to one of the members of my lodge, he immediately began to raise objections before I had a chance to explain anything further about my intentions than the fact that a critical survey of the Fraternity was contemplated. This cautious brother counseled:

"Leave all the criticism of our Fraternity to outsiders. Masonry always has had plenty of enemies to point out its faults and shortcomings, and to throw brickbats at it, without any need for its own members doing any inside knocking. You ought to remember the old saying that 'It's a bad bird that befouls its own nest' and so you ought to lay off doing anything but boosting for your own Fraternity."

Now, I contend, that this "sacred cow" attitude is one of the outstanding faults of the Craft in America. Probably it is an inherent shortcoming of all secret societies. The impressive ceremonies of initiation, possibly, may suggest that there is something sacrosanct or superhuman about such a fraternity that no ordinary mortal should dare to question, much less criticise.

Should we Ostrich-like Bury Our Heads in the Sand?

In reality, Freemasonry is a gloriously human institution, and actually lays emphasis upon the facts of the frailty and weakness of the mortals who comprise its membership. Yet, if we should heed the warnings of some misguided Masonic "boosters," no one would ever venture the suggestion that anything about our Institution might possibly be improved. According to the views of these blind devotees to tradition, the Fraternity was so perfectly and divinely devised originally that it is now beyond the power of any human agency to improve its plans or programs. The real facts are that, while the roots of Freemasonry are grounded in antiquity, the body and branches of the Fraternity always have been alive and vigorous, and, consequently, always growing. Our ever green emblem, the sprig of Acacia, is not merely a symbol of individual immortality, it also suggests the immortality of our always-living and ever-growing Institution itself.

In the same way that too much self-esteem stunts the spiritual growth of any individual, so too much pride in its own superiority, with consequent resentment of criticism, hinders the growth of any society. Constructive criticism always has been the great stimulus for progress and growth of all institutions. So, in undertaking a series of investigations of the present relationships of Freemasonry with its contemporary institutions and their problems, I am breaking no precedents. Fortunately, Freemasonry has been freely criticized in the past, from the inside, as well as by its so-called enemies without its walls of secrecy.

This introductory outline of the objective of our series is not submitted as an apology but simply to clear up my readers' understanding as to my motives and to explain the means I propose to employ in conducting my investigations. In particular, I hope to make clear the cooperative character of my

studies and to urge you, as a real "booster" for your Fraternity, to join with us to the end that our combined endeavors may foster the continued growth and further extend the beneficent influence of our beloved brotherhood.

During the course of this series, I propose considering every criticism that has been directed against the present day activities of our Craft, including the slurs and slams of careless or uninformed outside critics as well as the more serious observation of shortcomings by those within the walls of our fraternal fold.

Naturally, such an inquiry should start with the question as to what extent the Fraternity is living up to its own ideals and accomplishing its stated purpose. Consequently, I propose frankly to face our first question:

To What Extent is Membership Today Improving Morals: Unbuilding Character?

Surely this is a fair question, since it is in no sense a secret that the chief objective of Freemasonry is characterbuilding.

That it is a question frequently raised by outsiders, a few recent incidents will illustrate. At the annual smoker of a club composed mainly of Masons, Will Rogers, the principal entertainer for the occasion, told this story, which I am relating, without attempting to reproduce the inimitable drawl of the world-famous comedian.

"Back home in Oklahoma, when I was a boy," said Will, "there used to be an old character living in our town who made his living shooting oil wells. He used to go clattering about the country driving an old pair of mules and a rattling old buckboard which was loaded with several cans of nitroglycerine while the old well-shooter himself always was loaded with bad liquor. Nobody in our town could ever remember seeing him completely sober and, naturally, everybody expected that some day there would be an accident and he would be blown to kingdom come. But, no matter how tight the old boy got, he always appeared to be able to attend to his business. Of course, lots of folks tried to warn him of his danger and to reform his wicked ways. I remember one day my dad got to talking with this old fellow. "Jim," says dad, "are you a Shriner ? " "Nope," answered Jim. "Are you a Knight Templar?" dad inquired next. "Nope," was Jim's reply. "Well, you surely must be a Mason, aren't you ? " dad persisted. "No sir'ee, Mr. Rogers," Jim answered cheerfully. "I ain't no Mason, nor an Oddfellow, nor an Elk; I'm jest an ordinary drunkard."

This sly dig at shortcomings very generally supposed to be typical of certain fraternal activities, which our famous comedian put over so cleverly, was recently expressed more unpleasantly, with evident intent of "getting a rise” out of our good friend Dr. S. Parkes Cadman, in a letter which recently appeared in his column in "The New York Tribune." This critic's letter to Dr. Cadman, who is one of the Grand Chaplains of New York state, asked the doctor to explain why so many Freemasons of the letter-writer's acquaintance were such "intemperate and dissolute characters," whereas it was generally understood that every Masonic Lodge is supposed to inculcate and uphold high moral principles and practices among its members. Dr. Cadman answered this critic by asserting that those Masons who are guilty of such conduct are the rare exceptions and, therefore, must not be regarded as representative of the general moral attitude and behavior upheld by the Fraternity as a whole.

Nevertheless, this criticism of the misbehavior of certain bibulous brethren seems to me quite common and I am not so sure that it is not fairly well justified. While I would by no means admit that Masons are less temperate than other men outside the Craft, still I think that the Fraternity falls far short of living up to one of the principal tenets that it professes to inculcate and practice.

However, the question as to whether by joining a Masonic Lodge a man may learn the better to subdue his appetites and improve his behavior is not the main issue of this particular inquiry. Surely it must be admitted that our ceremonials of initiation do not transform weak, frail mortals into angels of light. Likewise, it does not seem quite fair to expect Masonic behavior to rank very much above that of average human beings.

But, before passing on to another phase of this inquiry, I desire to register my protest against the common practice of meeting every criticism of Masonic morality with the threadbare retort that "Masonry is not a reform school." No one pretends that it is, because it is an open secret that lodges attempt to guard their portals by making fairly strict inquiries into the past behavior and moral character of everyone seeking admission into the Fraternity.

On the other hand, if the answer to one of the first questions put up to each candidate does not clearly state the moral objective of all Masonic activities; in fact, if the entire Masonic ritual does not instill plain principles of morality and impress the fact that Masonry is a cultural agency, definitely aiming at the betterment its members and the advancement of all humanity, then I have been sadly mistaught as to the meaning of the English language.

However, let us view this matter from another angle by considering a psychological criticism of ritualism. This particular criticism, of course, is not confined to our Craft, but is directed against all secret societies or institutions in which symbolical ceremonials constitute a principal factor. The question is:

Does Ritualism Menace Morality by Substituting Emotion for Effort?

The scientific principle involved in this criticism, which many prominent psychologists have directed against the performing of ceremonials or the reciting of creeds, is the same as the idea expressed by the Great Teacher who said, "Be ye doers of the word, not hearers only."

In brief, students of psychology argue that persons addicted to creeds and ceremonials frequently fail to make correct distinctions between words and deeds. By reciting a ritual, the individual is apt to feel that he has actually accomplished a worthy work, therefore his real deeds or doings may not square up with his moral professions.

I doubt if any unprejudiced observer will deny that this danger exists, although I believe that one psychologist has carried this criticism too far when he claims that "Freemasons are our modern Pharisees who 'love the uppermost rooms at feasts and the chief seats at the synagogue, and greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi.' "

While, as I have stated, this seems a bit thick, still I believe it would not be a bad idea for every Freemason, particularly Masters of lodges, to read the twenty-third chapter of St. Matthew and, thereby, learn something about the shortcomings of those ancient addicts of ritualism, the Pharisees.

Perhaps you may never have heard any person bragging that he was "a good Mason." Possibly, you have never met a brother Mason who could recite the ritual backwards, yet has never begun to put into practice the real principles of our profession.

Anyway, even though you may never have heard this effect of too much ritualism upon the individual morality of members, surely you have heard another phase of this criticism expressed by the following question:

Is the Average Lodge of Thy Twentieth Century Merely a Decree Mill?

In metropolitan districts, this certainly is the most frequent inside complaint against the present-day activities of our order. The claim is made that most city lodges are compelled to devote their chief attention to the business of putting candidates through the mill, in order to provide necessary funds for Grand Lodge assessments and other steadily increasing expenses all down the line. In many lodges, each successive Master endeavors to break the membership and money-raising records of preceding administrations.

In a personal canvass of as many absentee members of my lodge as I could reach during my term as Master, the most frequent excuse given for not attending lodge was that the constant repetition of degree ceremonials was tiresome and boring. For instance, a certain exceptionally intelligent member, a professional man of considerable prominence, told me frankly "I would just as soon attend the sessions of a Chinese school as to sit in lodge and hear nothing but that same old stuff droned over and over again until it sounds like a mere rigmarole to most of the men on the benches."

Another frequent excuse for non-attendance was the objection to the frequent drives for funds at meetings. "Why should I come to lodge and be held up for some fund or another, when it is easier and less expensive to go out in the street and be held up by a panhandler ?"

This protest by one of our brothers, of course, is not in keeping with the spirit of Freemasonry; nevertheless, it represents a real criticism and, possibly, explains to some extent why some members seldom attend their lodge meetings. Furthermore, I am not so sure that the complaint against commercialized charity is not more or less justified by the way some of the fundraising campaigns are conducted in many lodges. It seems to me that some of our Masonic fund-raising drives contain more of the "sounding brass and tinkling cymbal" element than they do of the real spirit of charity which "vaunteth not itself" and "is not puffed up.”

Do "Button" and "Knife and Fork" Members Dominate Numerically?

In all cases where the modern competitive spirit enters into our fraternal activities and whenever lodges strive after quantity rather than quality records of membership, this criticism against making a degree mill out of the lodge seems justified. Likewise, it doubtless accounts for another common criticism of our order, represented by the following question:

Based upon the truth of the old maxim that "There must be fire where there is so much smoke," it surely must be admitted that this particular criticism is prevalent. You hear the characterization of "button Masons" and "belly Masons" everywhere you may go. Surely you have met many whose main activities in Masonry consists of buying a pin nearly as big as a fireman's badge which they display as

conspicuously as possible everywhere they go. Likewise, you will probably have to admit that there are a good many members of your own lodge who never come out to any meetings excepting the ones which provide a free feed. The popularity of the "Fourth Degree" in Freemasonry is comparable to the popularity of the "Nineteenth Hole" in golf. Some of our brethren appear to be deaf to nearly everything excepting the call "from labor to refreshment."

While this, of course, merely represents a common weakness of frail humanity; nevertheless it also indicates a shortcoming and handicap to the progress of the more desirable and praiseworthy practices in our Craft. Surely, we have "missed the mark of our high calling," if we have failed to impress our candidates with the fact that Freemasonry means far more than either social or business intercourse.

However, it can not be denied that this particular criticism is based upon fairly universal faults of human beings rather than any serious shortcoming of our Institution. Let us, therefore, as our final question, consider a criticism which is directly and definitely concerned with our customary lodge activities.

Are Masonic Meetings Devoted Mainly to "Backpatting, Blah and Bunk"?!

Here is a criticism that comes from a representative of our rather boisterous and somewhat obstreperous "younger generation," a young man of my own profession who has achieved quite a brilliant reputation in the magazine field. If you find the language rather loose and the criticism somewhat extravagant, please bear in mind that I am attempting to give it to you as I received it. Likewise, pray do not overlook the fact that this criticism represents a fairly common point of view among many of our younger brothers.

"I quit coming to lodge because I found that most Masonic meetings are devoted mainly to backpatting, blah and bunk. Every lodge night I used to go home with a pain in the neck from listening to some pompous old windbag spouting a lot of stewed bologna about the grand and glorious deeds of some other old windbag. Then, after the first hot-air artist ran out of gas, the old bird who had been all puffed up at hearing himself lied about so fluently would have to get up and hand back a big line of blah-blah to the big banana oil merchant who began the palaver."

If any of our older readers are unable to understand the above, get one of the younger members of your lodge to translate it. Incidentally your younger brother may give you an "earful" of information as to the attitude of the Masons upon whom the destinies of the Craft will depend tomorrow.

You will note that I have made little attempt to elaborate or comment upon the criticisms raised in the questions which have been presented. My hope has been to arouse your interest in these problems and to obtain your observations or views regarding these matters.

You may deny that any or all of these criticisms are in any degree justified. You may pass lightly over them as minor matters, deserving of little or no consideration. You may hold that these affairs should be kept under cover and never discussed in any such a public forum as the pages of a magazine. But, I contend, that if you are a true friend of our Fraternity you will frankly face these issues, and try to find out to what extent they are operative in our lodges. Likewise, if you are able to contribute your bit or observation or experience towards the solution of these problems, or in answering the questions that

have been raised in this article, you will be rendering a real service to the Craft by participating in this discussion. Address your letters of comment, criticism or suggestion to the Editor of THE BUILDER.